CORNWALL HOUSING

Your rents and housing service

Council listening event

Summary report November 2022

Listening to tenants

On 24 November, lead Council cabinet member for housing and planning Olly Monk, and council officers, heard from tenants about rent setting and spending priorities.

Ten tenants from across Cornwall took part. They heard from council officers about the opportunities and challenges of financing Cornwall's Council homes and tenants' services.

They also heard how the Council officers had already considered tenants' feedback from the:

- STAR tenant satisfaction survey,
- Your Home Your Views survey,
- key themes from tenants' complaints, as well as
- 12 case studies about tenants' experiences managing with the cost of living. Of which half said that they felt there should be a 'small' rent increase because 'good services are important'.

Tenants at the event were asked:

If the average weekly rent is £75, in pounds/pence, what do you think 'a small increase' would be?

The tenants at the listening event gave a range of responses from £2.25 to £6, with an average of £4.

Tenants and Council officers discussing rent levels and spend

Which areas should we prioritise for investment?

Tackling damp and mould, and general core maintenance ('fabric first') were the top priorities. This echoes the feedback from the surveys.

In table discussions, officers and tenants explored several topics, including:

Condition of homes

Discussing the strategy and approach of maintenance works; tenants felt that those with the worst homes should be prioritised for works. But, that Cornwall Housing must also take account of household health, complaints and disrepair claims, as well as planning works in key areas to get best value for money.

Rent levels

Whilst existing tenants are protected this year by the Government's rent cap of 7%, if the Council is allowed to charge a slightly higher rent for new tenants, most the tenants at the event felt that this would be acceptable. This is because of the low rent levels in the Council, and rents in other homes in Cornwall are much higher. However, tenants cautioned that this would need to be sensitively communicated.

Questions and answers

Tenants asked questions at the event, including:

What number do tenants press if they try to contact the Inclusion Advisor team on 0300 1234 161? Select 2 for rents and housing services.

Tenants shouldn't be paying for the mistakes of Cornwall Housing, why can't the Council find the funds to make up for their failings?
The Council legally can't put 'general fund' monies (from council tax etc) towards tenants' services and homes (part of the 'ringfenced' Housing Revenue Account). The Council have learnt lessons about their management failings of Cornwall Housing, which is no consolation for tenants. However, we have got a new Board and a new senior team which have the confidence of the Council, and a new commitment from the Council (in the new management agreement and plan) to work with the new team to improve services and homes for tenants.

Has the Government capped the Housing Benefit amount that it will pay?
No, but the social rent will be capped for existing tenants at 7% increase.
Our rents are lower than Local Housing Allowance rates which determined how much housing benefit someone in private rent can get. Through the budget the Government sets all the rules for housing benefit.

When the Council need as much money as possible to pay to improve homes and services, why are there homes near me left empty for months on end?
The lost rent from empty homes won't make up for the funding lost during the four-year rent decrease. However, it is really important we make available every home we have, and we are working with Cornwall Housing to make efficiencies in 'voids' (speeding up the time we can re-let an empty home). We are looking at selling several old unique homes on the open market, as it would cost a huge amount of money to bring them up to a decent standard, and with the sale receipt we can build modern homes for less.

Would it be a good idea for the housing sector to have an Ofsted style inspector to look at a basic criteria every 3 years?

Between 2001 and 2011 the Audit Commission had the power to inspect housing associations and local authorities. Many commentators believe this period saw the biggest improvement in housing performance, particularly improvements in repair and housing management. If passed, the recent Social Housing Regulation Bill is going to give the Regulator the power to inspect landlords where it believes there are issues, with the ability to down grade housing organisations or place them in supervision.

CORNWALL COUNCIL
one and all • onen hag oll

What are the next steps?

The Council makes the decision on rent levels. Listening to tenants views are an important part of this. The outcome and supporting information will be sent out to all tenants in March 2023.